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Informing education and social reform

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Impact Objectives

- Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural approach to gather evidence on young people's transitions to higher education and the labour market to determine what policies are effective
- Help shape policy on inequalities in education and access to the labour market
- Empower local actors in countries where there are structural and other problems with access to higher education

Informing education and social reform

Dr Céline Rojon of the University of Edinburgh, UK, and Dr Javier Hernandez of the Universidad Catolica de Temuco, Chile, describe the need to gather evidence to support education and social reforms that enable all young people to benefit from access to higher education and the opportunities this offers



Dr Céline Rojon



Dr Javier Hernandez

From your perspective, how important is higher education for individuals and wider society?

CR: Education can open many doors to individuals, such as access to their chosen career. For wider societies too, it is vital that part of the population is highly educated in order to fill important professional roles. Unfortunately, however, it is still the case that not everyone has ready access to higher education. In our project called AcrossLife we seek to identify the factors that can help and hinder young people to access higher education and the labour market.

JH: Higher education not only plays a significant role for the economic development of people and communities, but also to the construction of identity. This is an area that has been overlooked by literature on the topic. Subjective issues related to family expectations and social status also affect an individual's educational aspirations and achievements.

How do you see the AcrossLife project contributing towards social reform in Chile?

JH: The current wave of social reforms in Chile is the result of a grassroots movement expressing dissatisfaction with the existing lack of equality in education and life opportunities for individuals. Therefore, they are an interesting case of formal political systems reacting to citizen pressure. Our project will help to identify the types of reforms that are needed in Chile and could assist us to avoid creating new problems or struggles.

CR: Our research will compare young people's experiences transitioning to higher education and then on to the labour market, in four different countries: the UK, Germany, Argentina and Chile. This will help us to determine what structures and systems work well and what does not. These insights could inform educational discussions on an international level, not just in Chile. We chose the four countries to represent different education systems and a range of cultures.

Who do you hope will ultimately benefit from the results of your research?

CR: Our project is intended to reach not only academic audiences, but also local, national and international authorities, policy makers, public and political campaigners, business leaders, practitioners and society in general. We hope that information on the project and its findings, communicated through our project website, social media and workshops, will result in public debate and help inform all levels of society. We

aim thereby to empower social actors in Chile and other countries facing similar challenges. We believe that our project's findings will act as a benchmark not only for scholars, but also to authorities and policy makers seeking to introduce strategies that will educate new generations of young people on an equal footing, regardless of socioeconomic and ethnic background.

In what ways are you hoping to add to the current knowledge base on this topic?

CR: An evidence based understanding of the aspects examined in the project could help shape policy to address inequalities in access to education and the labour markets, and reveal where the system is currently providing young people with insufficient educational and labour market opportunities. Comparative research across countries is particularly useful in highlighting the problems of the Chilean system in an international context and to deduce insights applicable to other countries and systems. In the long term, we anticipate that findings from our project will highlight the role played by universities' and organisations' recruitment, selection and assessment methods, in relation to social and economic inequality. This is vital, not only from an academic perspective, where we seek to contribute to an underdeveloped evidence base, but even more so from an ethical, social and political viewpoint.



Improving social mobility

The AcrossLife project is a multidisciplinary international collaboration between Chile and the UK that seeks to widen social mobility by examining the factors that hinder or facilitate the transitions from school to higher education and from there into the workforce

Drs Céline Rojon and Javier Hernandez are joint leaders of the AcrossLife project, which is aiming to identify the barriers and enablers that influence young peoples' transition from school into higher education and from there into the labour market. The team comprises Rojon and Dr Elisabetta Mocca, both based at the University of Edinburgh, and Hernandez and colleagues Dr Emilio Moya and Gabriel Dueñas of the Universidad Católica de Temuco, Chile. Rojon explains that the researchers were: 'purposely chosen from the different disciplines of education, sociology, psychology and public policy and because of their knowledge of the countries we are studying'.

Commencing in early 2016, AcrossLife will run for nearly three years, jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK and the National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICYT) in Chile under the Newton Fund Scheme. The study comprises a comprehensive literature review, a large survey of young people in the UK, Germany, Chile and Argentina and in-depth interviews with a cohort of not only young people in those four countries, but also local and national policy makers and representatives from educational institutions and organisations.

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

One of the issues that has prompted the project is the persistence of inequality in life opportunities evident in Chile, other Latin American near-developed nations and in regions of the UK. As Hernandez points out: 'education is vital to personal and social development and is key to improving social mobility, especially in low income countries'. In Chile, the problem is particularly evident within regional, rural and indigenous communities.

As a result of grassroots pressure, the Chilean government has embarked on a series of social reforms aimed at opening up educational and employment opportunities for all sectors of society. However, Hernandez is concerned that: 'the reforms could lead to unrealistic expectations about achieving social mobility through education, particularly if labour markets remain unchanged'. Therefore, it is important that policy makers are fully informed about the factors that can present life opportunities to all.

Rojon notes that, despite being one of the wealthier nations: 'the UK has a multicultural population that has faced challenges in terms of creating an inclusive educational system'. There are financially disadvantaged

geographical regions, such as some of the inner city areas, in which young people have had particular difficulties succeeding. The UK has made changes over the last two decades resulting in a greater percentage of young people in these situations achieving good results at secondary school, however there is more to be done. These places make for interesting case studies, since they will help reveal the factors that most improved outcomes for pupils.

INTERNATIONAL SURVEYS

It has been noted that inequality in opportunity is more prevalent in low income regions and the project seeks to quantify this by determining in what way social background mediates the transition to higher education and into the workforce. As well as studying concrete factors such as systems and institutions, the team will also enquire into the psychological wellbeing of those who have undergone these important transitions. Lastly, the project will examine the role played by organisations and companies and the policies supporting the education and labour arenas, in the transitions and outcomes for young people.

‘The cross-continent collaboration of the team is essential to the success of the project’

In order to cover the full gamut of educational, social and cultural influences on school to work transitions, the project is focusing on four different countries. ‘Chile provides the case of a country with a high percentage of private provision of secondary and tertiary education and a large degree of social inequality,’ says Hernandez. In contrast, Germany has a state-funded education system, even at tertiary level and: ‘offers a number of different academic and vocational pathways to students and a variety of career options,’ explains Rojon. The UK has a mostly state funded school system, but students are required to pay large sums towards tertiary education, as in Chile. Hernandez points out that Argentina has a mix of systems, combining ‘free tertiary institutions with private universities’.

The methods being used to collect data in the project are threefold. A comprehensive literature survey was followed by a survey across the four countries of around 900 students and young workers at different points in the transition pathway. One of the most challenging aspects of the project has been designing the surveys and targeting appropriate candidates, in order to derive meaningful, evidence-based results which can be used to leverage social debate and inform policy makers. Rojon says the final phase: ‘is to undertake in-depth interviews and case studies in each of the four countries to provide greater insight into individual’s experiences of transitioning between life domains’.

EARLY FINDINGS

Hernandez points out that the literature review is revealing in that: ‘few studies have looked at transitions from a life course perspective and there is little research into the effects of subjectivity on life outcomes. It is interesting that there appears to be a universal belief among social classes that going to university will improve one’s life outcomes.’ Rojon explains that the main factors that ease young people’s early life transitions include, amongst others: ‘advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, studying STEM subjects at school, support from schools and effective

social networks’. Conversely, barriers include a ‘lack of financial and social support, a minority ethnic background, no existing graduates in the family and low self-confidence’.

The quantitative survey and the in-depth interviews are expected to reveal much greater insights into why these factors are important and how structures and systems can be improved to put people on a more equal footing when it comes to seeking a good education and following rewarding careers. The project concludes in November 2018, when the full findings will be revealed at public engagement workshops in the UK and Chile. A key aim of the project is to make its findings widely known to broad audiences internationally. Therefore, a full suite of publications and promotional vehicles are planned, in addition to the workshops. Communications will be made through the existing project website, on social media, via academic papers and various public engagement channels. The aim is not only to provoke further academic research, but to engage the attention of the public and policy makers in the key factors influencing life opportunities.

Hernandez believes the findings from this project could be far reaching. ‘I am currently researching recruitment mechanisms in Chilean companies with a view to improving their mechanisms, so the AcrossLife results will hopefully lead to those from disadvantaged backgrounds being given more opportunities in the workforce.’ Rojon feels there will remain more to be discovered about the factors influencing social mobility and life opportunities. ‘It would be interesting to look in the future at other countries’ systems and outcomes, to undertake longitudinal studies and to consider other transition points such as from primary to secondary school.’ The results of the project, if translated into policy changes, have the potential to improve societal mental and economic wellbeing, and thereby improve the economic performance of whole nations.

Project Insights

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